

On the figurative speech.

Since its beginnings in our body of indo-euro-pean cultures, the poetical speech is based on figures which, all of them, in various degrees, imply a displacement or a widening of the "natural speech", i.e. the factual speech, in order to sollicitate our dreaming activity (or imaginative, or affective) and to induce us to pass the frame of the appearances. By so doing, another reality, deeper and richer, replaces the vision of our commonplace vision of things, we are incited to create (it is the exact meaning of Greek *poiein*) another world better fitted to our desire of a transcendence.

This little essay would like to bring some precisions on the figure which has, from the origins, known the greatest favour in our cultures, that is to say the group metonymy-synecdoche-metaphor, which a special orientation towards its direct applications into Old Norse, known under the names of *heiti* and *kenningar*. This type of reflexion is not new : it goes back to Aristoteles' Rethoric and Poetics and has been better and better studied by Ciceron, Quintilianus, then, in the XIXth century, by Dumarsais (1804) and eventually, by P. Fontanier (about 1830) whom I shall closely follow here.

Fontanier, on the inalienable principle of the comparison, made a distinction between three sorts of figures ("tropes") : those which establish a correspondance between two notions, those which proceed by connexion and those which take their starting point in a resemblance. The word metonymy can, etymologically, comprise the three acceptations, but we are going to see that the first case would apply rather to the metonymy proper, the second one, to the synecdoche and the third one, to the metaphor, although, in every case, a certain relation is instituted between at least two terms. To take a very common instance, telling a lady she is a rose is not tantamount to assimilate the former to the latter, but tends to give birth to a relationship which is due to a common

feature (beauty, freshness, grace, etc.). It is this ~~relationship~~ which gives its value to the trope.

a) The trope by correspondence, or metonymy, which consists, etymologically, in naming an object with the name of another object (hringr for sverð, f.i.) is only possible because our mind invents a privileged relation, directly accessible, between the two (cause and effect, container and contents, place and what stands into it, etc. : this point will be developed below). It is what Aristoteles called passing from the species to the gender, or from the gender to the species, in order to make better acquaintance (Old Norse kenna við, kenna til) with the notion which is envisaged. If we want to name a thing, a being or a notion by way of another thing, being or notion, these elements must belong to a same whole (un ensemble) to make possible this transfer of denomination, that is to say : the entire operation is the equivalent of a reflexion on the sign. The sea-gull of the wounds, to say the raven, is not understandable without the presence, in the background of our imagination, of blood, or battle, or dead heroes. As Roman Jakobson says, a syntactic combination of a special type takes place in the poet's mind as well as in his interlocutor's, since the aim is to class together ("classer ensemble") certain images that are not usually, nor naturally associated.

Freud, who is interested by the dispositions of a latent speech, present in the background of our consciousness, in opposition to the manifest speech, does not speak otherly when he uses the word condensation (Verdichtung), by means of the metonymy, of a body of representations more or less present in our mind : the fire of the arm, to express a gold arm-ring, "condenses" in this way all the connotations attached to : the woman, gold, grace, beauty or, it the picture is applied to a king, to : majesty, liberality, splendour.

It is also what Jacques Lacan means when he suggests, according to his peculiar way of expressing himself, to call the metonymy a "word for word" (mot à mot). We could as well speak of contiguity (for instance in the case of jár and hestr, for hosse) or of subordination (the idea of snót is "subordinated" to

the idea of woman, kona) or still of coordination (the same of any tree standing in the forest is linked, "coordinated" to the idea of a man facing his enemies in the battle).

In every case, the intention is to denominate in another way, to find a word which replaces another word, the condition being that a relationship exists between both. This is the reason why the theoreticians of this notion propose various classifications, usually very long, which, all of them, are prompted by the same principle : a person for another (a god for a man), a being for a thing (the name of a ship, Ormr, Vísundr, for this ship), a place or an epoch for their contents (the Valhöll for the einherjar), the raw material for the product made out of it (malmr for sverð), the abstract for the concrete (allvaldr for konungr), the cause for the effect (lind for shield), the symbol for the thing (fagrahvél, that is beautiful wheel for the sun), etc. Let us notice that we are dealing, here, nearly always, with heiti.

B) With the synecdoche (greek synekdechestai), the accent is set far more strongly on an understatement, on a whole which the chosen word represents only a part of without which we should not understand it. It is the reason why Fontanier speaks here of connexion : the existence of the given word is included in the existence of the other one, we have to reconstitute the association to be able of understanding the word we are reading. Of course, the synecdoche is only a particular form of the metonymy and, to come back to an instance given earlier, malmr for sverð is properly a synecdoche. But Aristoteles was right when he placed it in a general theory of the persuasion, beyond the simple relationship. The aim is, here, to bring the interlocutor to discover, without his consent, so to speak, one or several features of the object which he has not initially thought of and which, accordingly, will enrich and give colour to his own representations by way of compelling him to transgress the limits of his understanding.

Fontanier divided this figure into eight categories : the part for the whole, the whole for the part, the material the number, the genre, the species, the abstraction and the individual

This taxonomy does not matter, it will always be possible to contest or modify it. What is interesting, in any case, is to focalize the attention on the parts of a whole. There is, linked to the sun, an idea of ardour, everlasting ardour, eygló, and it is rightly by means of a synecdoche that this concept imposes to the star of the day a dimension of a temporal kind which did not necessarily coincide with the current idea we may have of it, especially into a culture where the sun is rare and seems to be in state of disappearing periodically and of being away for ever. However, there too, we hardly get out of the category of the heiti as simple synonyms loaded with connotations that are not necessarily obvious, or of the hálfkenningar where the processus of relationship does not imply yet a very advanced effort of elaboration.

c) This last feature will enlarge to take its whole strength with the metaphor, for which Fontanier speaks of a mechanism of resemblance. Metaphora in Greek, Translatio in Latin clearly point to an idea of transfer, of transposition, of transportation indeed or even of substitution which cause us to make a considerable progress towards the two notions previously envisaged. The key-concept is probably here the concept of analogy. Out of the principle of analogy arise implicit comparisons which can be extremely subtle and are able to overflow the frame suggested by the initial support. When the dwarf Alvís, in the *Alvissmál*, or the unknown author of the *Rígsþula* are lavishing, both, the names of the great natural elements such as they are employed by the diverse categories of supernatural beings or the names of the children of the three social "classes" he knows, we see quite well that the chosen terms are intending to suggest a whole context, social, moral, religious, which stretches far beyond their simple statement. Vindr, the wind, becomes, for instance, *oepi*, howling, by the giants and *dynfara*, deafening, by the *álfar*. By so doing, it is the whole world of those marvellous creatures, the way they consider reality, their idiosyncrasy which unveils itself, to the prejudice of other connotations which do not interest respectively giants and *álfar*, and which allow us, accordingly, to determine their proper characteristics. In the

same way, a whole scenery takes form around such names of *prælli's* sons as *Fjósniir* (Muddy) or *Fúlnir* (Stinking), especially if we compare them to those of *Karl's* sons such as *Drengi* (Brave), or *Smíðr*.

In the words of F. de Saussure, the word selected "is like the centre of a constellation", we do not envisage the other elements which make also part of this constellation. If the author of *Fóstbraeðra saga* chooses to call the icy wind "the dog of the alder-tree", it is obviously that he wants to select, among the vast complex of ideas which can attach themselves to the notion of the wind in winter, only the aspect of destruction of life : out of such a device, a whole atmosphere is created.

We can proceed inversely : to speak in metaphors is the exact contrary of to describe; the description tries to give the measure of a distance between the speaking subject and the object which is described, whereas the metaphor wants to abolish this distance, by means, precisely, of the principle of analogy we were speaking of a few minutes ago. It presents an idea under the sign of another idea and it is the link between both, expressed by this sign, which establishes a continuity, or a conformity; the garment of *Heðinn* (*Heðins váð*), to express the idea of the armour of the warrior, conveys the idea to know only by the evocation of *Heðinn*, a hero who, thus, gives its sign to the garment. By this means too, the metaphor can, in its turn, produce an analogy, the warrior who has been introduced in this way takes, by this fact, a heroic colour. This is what Freud meant with "displacement" (*Verschiebung*) of the manifest speech in comparison with the latent speech : if we say of jarl *Hákon* that he is the *Týr* of the land of the sword (this one being the shield) it "displaces" the rank of the jarl and promotes him to the dignity of a god, which corresponds rightly with the intentions of *Einarr Smálaglamm* in his *Vellekla*.

I was speaking of sign or token : it is clear that the metaphor takes place at an intermediary point between the given datum and the intentions of the poet; thence, by successive irradiations, all the associations, all the enrichments are made possible. Jacques Lacan prefers say "un mot pour un autre", a word for another word, because he wants to respect, by this way, the

perpetually blurred movement of the unconsciousness : there is doubtless, behind this device, a refusal of the too much deliberate characterization, always uncomplete and unsatisfactory; this attitude is perfectly <sup>similar</sup> to the attitude of our Surrealists, and to the meaning of the adjective surrealist such as André Breton and his disciples understood and used it. Or let us speak of correspondences, according to the intentions of Baudelaire, who had read Swedenborg, in the famous poem which bears this title. It is always the same interplay of callings, echoes, the same attempt to exhaust, ideally at least, a too much complex reality. Gold may be the sun of the abyss, kaf sunna : it is not sufficient to try to justify this image by a simple reference to the myth Snorri tells us (these blocks of gold which illuminate the dwelling of Aegir, god of the ocean), the picture calls for a lot of associations, particularly between an infinite element (air-sun) and another equally enormous (the ocean) which have as a common sign the frightening immensity suggested by the idea of kaf - properly : a dive.

In any case, it is necessary that a similarity, even remote and perceptible only after a long reflexion, gathers the metaphorized term and its expression, similarity or similitude - we have already spoken of equivalence -, resemblance or "to be like" ("être comme"), far-fetched specification or identification by contrast, in short, everything that can be conveyed by the word "analogy". We see quite well the chain-reaction provoked by the successive metaphors of a "rekit" kenning like sára þorns sveita svanr (to say : raven) : animal reign by displacement (svanr being another kind of bird), human reign by similitude (sweat for blood), vegetal reign by similarity (thorn - sword), etc... The mechanism of the system is, every time, the same : to hook "en passant" a new image or notion which, in the same time, is in a probable relationship with the point of departure and may refer to the point of arrival. The whole mental alchemy of the device, and, accordingly, its value, comes from the supplementary resonances, harmonics or extensions which have been drawn along in the meantime. As, in every case, the copula is missing, has been willingly omitted (see the difference between : this hero is like a lion, and N... is a lion), the hope is that the interlocutor will spontaneously identify the two notions or representations, that

his intelligence, his imagination or his sensitivity will reconstitute the explanatory missing link and, accordingly, that he will accomplish he too, a really creative work, not necessarily, besides, identical to the one firstly envisaged by the author of the metaphor ; double creation, thus, properly poetical widening and, in the same time, genuine collaboration. By so doing, the contagious strength of the poetic expression closely associates author and interlocutor and the poem arises of their active understanding, tacit as it is. It is one of the ways, although not the chief one, probably, to understand the "Je est un autre" (I is another) by Rimbaud. We are equally allowed, if we prefer, to speak of transposition, because of a comparison which, in any case, occurs in the mind, but which is not indicated or precised. We see quite well how do operate these transpositions, member by member, in a kenning (for "woman") like *hauks hölmr Jörð*, where the transposition woman-goddess (*Jörð*) is doubled with a transposition telluric-human (*hölmr*) and cynegetic-aesthetic (*haukr*). Aristoteles did not mean anything else when he noticed the cases of metaphors by passage from a species to another species.

We can enter some little more technical details. Do call phore the metaphoric term, or vehicle, or comparing (in the quoted instance, *Jörð*, then, *hölmr*) and theme the metaphORIZED term (or tenor /tenseur/, or compared (woman, then arm). It is not possible to speak of metaphor if a third term, non expressed but implicite, does not force our attention, obviously or after reflexion. It is the reason why a good deal of kenningar do not, properly speaking, rest on metaphors ; they are only periphrasises which contain in themselves their explanation and do not expect from the interlocutor a creative activity. *Hjúrsöngvir*, for warrior, belongs to this last category.

The scalds were prone to practise what we use to call spun metaphors (*métaphores filées*), which proceed with the initial process in a more complex speech. We discover that, very often, it is a combination of a starting point metaphorical with metonymical successors, the first one understandable only by means of the letters. To say that the sword is *fleinbraks furr* (the instance is given by Snorri Sturluson himself) takes its starting point in a true metaphor (on *furr*) but is understandable only when we have elucidated the metonymies coming afterwards. Finally, the polymorphism of this figure is remarkable, since it may apply as well to a

substantive as to an adjective, a verb or an adverb.

Let us try now to penetrate more closely, in the analysis of the working of these figures, in the mental state of their inventors as well as of their readers or hearers. Metonymy, synecdoche and metaphor (and certain of their variants, like the catachresis) have, all of them, the same function : they conjugate an argumentative aim to an analogical working, or, more precisely, they try to reach the former by means of the latter.

I have said that the essence of the process consisted in an instauration, by force, by an expected solicitation or by simple "poetic" grace, of a privileged relationship between the theme and its phore (this last word must be taken etymologically : which bears it, which is supposed able of bearing it). This implies, as R. Jakobson pointed out, that the speaking person, and then the receptor after him, operates a semantic choice inside the corpus he knows. Dumarçais said far more prettily that these figures come in order to suppress a dearth of words (viennent combler une disette de mots), because "the languages have not as much words as we have ideas". Remember the fortune J. Lacan used to do, in his personal way, to this kind of formulation. And it is true that this constatation, in its visible banality, places us in the heart of the matter. To borrow the language of the psychoanalysts, our unconsciousness is constantly producing, according to the various solicitations it is fronted with, a latent, amorphous speech, more or less formulated, towards which the manifest speech will be, will only be a limited expression. Thence, in his desire to suggest the greatest number of connotations inspired to him by the notion he envisages, the doggedness with which the poet tries to find a formulation which will say what he wants to say. And still more : everything he feels there could be said also around the notion in question, in order to exhaust its polysemy. His creative emotion has spontaneously been felt by him, in essence, unspeakable. He is left with the only solution of suggesting it, of helping to recreate it and there, the metaphor and the figures akin to it will be of a great help to him. Not flatly say, nor unveil as directly as possible in the way the logic would have it, what is most clear in the message, but try to approach confusedly, by a play of avoidances and of tricks (évitements et ruses, these words

by J.Lacan) this not-said (non-dit) which is precisely what would be the most precious to be said! Thus, we see kenningar, innocent to all appearance, particularly by loving scalds like Kormákr Ögmundarson, insinuating scabrous allusions simply by the choice of the metaphors. The situation is the same, as we know, with the metaphors present in the *náðvisur*.

Paul Valéry or the philosopher Alain insisted very much on the fact that our language, especially our abstract language, in its present state, is made of metaphors the ground of which is concrete : such is the case of our verbs "weigh" or "touch" (into French, of course) when they are envisaged in their intellectual acceptations ("once I have seriously weighed your arguments" , "une fois mûrement pesés vos arguments" , or "your indifference weighs down on me", *voire indifférence me pèse*) or in their affective ones (this word touches me much, *cette parole me touche beaucoup*). In this way, once more, an effect of mediation is reached, the principle of the operation being selected alone to apply in other fields than those where it prevails ordinarily. The rain of the swords, *hjörregn*, takes its starting point in a quite concrete image (rain) to end in an image properly abstract, the battle. We use as well to speak, into French, of a rain of blows or of a rain of blood which allow us to pass gradually over different degrees of intellectualization. It is beyond any doubt that, as Aristoteles thought, the study of these figures is a part of a larger theory of the persuasion. What would not be attained by a clear and direct image, the margin of dream and of elaboration leaft to the interlocutor out of the metaphor allows him to go back farther into the working, conscious or not, of the elaboration achieved by the author. We have here, once more, to deal with this need of filling up this "dearth of words" Dumarsais was speaking of. When we effectuate such arbitrary reconciliations, when we found an unexpected resemblance on an appearing discontinuity, the natural relationship between things are modified for the benefit of a more subtle, but richer relation. It is the reason why the metaphor belongs far more to the field of the intuition than to this of the reasoning, in spite of the fact that, in any case, the excations, minimal at least, of this reasoning cannot be abolished : the necessity of a link must always remain felt.

And, one we have verified the fact, it is

just this type of analogical working which allows us to investigate the true values of the category of figures we are studying here. I have given a lot of instances, in the above pages, of abstract terms which help to invest this notion, I have, namely, proposed the word allusion. The old Scandinavians, who were prompted, in this order of ideas, by a strong desire of knowledge (kenna við, kenna til, thence kenning) knew, felt that it is ridiculous to pretend to "know" the reality which is properly unspeakable, but they were incited to try to tell it : this is, properly, the poetical inspiration, creative by definition. Out of the material of the language, encouraged by their science, in fields, particularly, where their imagination liked to exert itself, (fields like religion - pagan, it goes without saying, - navigation, battle, love, nature) they were in search of the mediate mode which, in the same time, is saying what they are wanting to say and adds the unprecise aura, capital indeed, their dreaming has added to it. We deduce from that, of course, the importance taken by the sign in every speech of this genre : the scalds will have brought a visible attention to this point. Without quoting it, due to the lack of place, the vísa 10 of Egill Skallagrímsson's Arinbjarnarkviða gives us a perfect instance of the point. The whole vísa, which describes the terrible look his enemy darted on him - that is king Eiríkr blóðox - is placed under the sign of the moon, mortal deity, (tunglskin, ormfránn ennimáni, oeglsgeisli). It is, accordingly, through the intermediary of the terror and myths attached to the star of the night that is expressed the fear of the poet : we feel him anxious to enlarge maximally the semantic area conveyed already by the unworked term (tungl, máni), which is also a first metaphor for eyes, look. True to say, many other elements could be associated with Eiríkr's look or with the moon, but, as F. de Saussure would say, the metaphorical association interrupts ("suspend") the elements which do not ensure, to some degree, the analogy. We are so to speak compelled to remain inside the sphere that has been assigned to us by the poet and, if I may express myself so, to fill it with everything we will be able to add to the first incitation wanted by him.

Finally, and this will be the end of my demonstration, the whole effect of the determinate figures we have studied here is tantamount to saying that we synthesize representations which can often be heterogeneous around an axis (theme) indefinitely

(absolutely speaking) generator of ideas, images and feelings. The remark has often been made, for instance, that these figures compelled us to associate a register (natural, sensorial, affective, etc...) to one or several other.

The scalds had become masters in this art. Do see the astonishing work of synthesis the interpreter has to accomplish to understand a kenning, particularly complex, true to say, like *nausta blakks hlémána gífrs drífu gímslóngvir*, for "warrior", that is to say the one who brandishes the fire of the tempest of the witch of the moan of the Hlér (a giant of the sea) of the horse of the boat-sheds. A whole culture, diversified and complex, is indispensable to understand such a prowess!

These scanty and swift notations allow me to answer to the irritating question of the origin of scaldic poetry. As everybody knows, numerous are the theories on this point. The most firmly defended wants that heiti and kenningar go back to religious practices, to some taboos which forbade to mention beings and things by their own names, the poetical art being sacred, as Snorri Sturluson demonstrates still in his Skáldskaparmál, with an elaborate myth to prove it, and as the constant references to the whole apparatus of mythology could suggest it. Naturally, it is not excluded that, in the origins, such had been the case, but we should have to deal, with an epoch anterior to that of the scalds the works of whom we have preserved.

In fact, since we know them, the Scandinavians have always been masters craftsmen : the viking ship, the sculpture on wood (prow of the Oseberg ship, then Norwegian stavkirker), the jewels of the viking age, the big tapestries, the ornamentations of certain runic stones, everything gives us the proof - not to forget the famous "scandinavian forms" which, nowadays, make the success of the most usual objects such as they conceive them - that they were matchless technicians, lovingly attached to the material they were working to force it to express in the best way, while respecting its nature, the core of their inspiration. Which remains, first and foremost, ornamental. But the character remarkably functional of everything they have elaborated, namely in the field of practical life,

cannot escape the attention of the observer.

One does not see why the same characteristics would not apply to their purely intellectual activities. I have done my best to underline in what measure the figures I have studied here represented an elaboration of the material - the language, the words - they were working and a conscious search to exhaust all their analogical, allusive, semiological, persuasive and synthetic possibilities. The metaphor - since it has chiefly been the matter of my essay - implies, etymologically, to go beyond the simple contents of the lexicon. As well as they have known how to induce the wood, the metal, the leather, the wool to say the maximum possible, - but notice that they were, here, limited by the necessarily limited possibilities of the material - they have tried to force technically the potentialities of their language. In fact, the same reflex, but exactly opposite, dictates the dry and reduced to the strict indispensable prose of the saga, the existence of it nobody is looking for in religious fields. But here, they had to say, as factually as possible, the aim was exactly contrary to that of the scalds - for one would make a meager harvest of metaphors, synecdoches and metonymies in an island-ingasaga. We must consider, however, that, as a principle, the writer has exactly the same preoccupation : elaborate as much as possible his material to try to express the most accurately what the author is expecting of its possibilities. As far as scaldic poetry is concerned, under the precise point of view we have adopted here, the scald was, before everything else, a perfect technician of the expression.

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